



**QAA**

# **Learning from Academic review of higher education in further education colleges in England 2005-07**



**Sharing good practice**

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## Summary

This report provides a summary of the findings of the Academic reviews of directly and consortium-funded higher education in further education colleges (colleges) in England between September 2005 and July 2007. This is the third in a series of reports which summarise the findings of the Academic review of higher education in colleges published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and it will contribute to a further report, *Learning from Academic review of higher education in further education colleges in England 2002-07*. QAA carried out 51 reviews at the request of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) between autumn 2005 and summer 2007. The reviews were conducted in 46 colleges across England. This represents the final round of Academic review of subjects in colleges.

Over 6,000 students were registered on the programmes reviewed, with 70 per cent studying full-time. Some 45 per cent of students were on programmes leading to Edexcel Higher National Certificates or Diplomas, about 10 per cent were registered on Foundation Degrees, 43 per cent on honours degrees and 2 per cent on postgraduate diplomas and/or master's degrees. While a significant majority of programmes reviewed were at the Intermediate level of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, the actual numbers of students studying for intermediate and honours level qualifications were about the same.

Most of the programmes reviewed were at the appropriate standard and of either commendable or approved quality. The reviewers had confidence in academic standards in 90 per cent of reviews; limited confidence in around 4 per cent; and no confidence in around 6 per cent of programmes reviewed.

Judgements on the quality of learning opportunities were overwhelmingly positive, with 99 per cent of all judgements being commendable or approved. No provision was judged to be failing in its entirety, with only three programmes in two colleges receiving a judgement of failing. There was a higher number of approved judgements in learning resources than in other aspects of quality. Student progression was the only aspect which received a failing judgement and the lowest number of approved judgements on quality.

The review reports show considerable evidence of good practice in the delivery of higher education in colleges. Particularly of note is the vocational relevance of curricula which are frequently informed by local professional and occupational needs. Employers have some influence on the design of curricula, particularly for Foundation Degrees, and also in many other programmes where staff have built up close relationships with local professionals or local businesses. Staff provide a highly supportive learning environment for students. Academic tutorials are a significant strength in creating a supportive and empowering learning environment.

Student assessment remains an area of some difficulty, contributing to all judgements of no confidence in standards in this review period. Colleges need to apply their assessment procedures and protocols rigorously to ensure the integrity and fairness of the assessment process. Colleges also need to develop a greater engagement with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*,

particularly *Section 4: External examining* and *Section 6: Assessment of students*. Staff development is also highlighted as an area for further development. Opportunities offered by colleges often focus more on pedagogy than on maintaining subject currency or scholarship.

Most colleges have well established and effective quality assurance processes that underpin the integrity of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. In the best cases, these engage with the Academic Infrastructure and have a strong focus on higher education. Effective quality assurance processes result in clear action plans, provide for the scrutiny of key documents by senior staff outside the subject in question, and ensure that all quality loops are closed. In the best examples, these processes are disseminated through the use of clear and accurate quality assurance manuals written by staff who have dedicated oversight of all higher education provision. In other colleges the processes do not refer specifically to higher education and this limits the opportunities for staff to use the findings to enhance higher education programmes. For example, student questionnaires lack a higher education focus or the data collected do not discriminate sufficiently between further and higher education students. A number of colleges need to do more to ensure that quality systems for higher education programmes are clearly documented and fully implemented across all programmes.

Overall, Academic review has identified a substantial amount of good practice which can be shared by colleges, and much of this is highlighted in this report. Academic review has also demonstrated significant improvement in weak provision through the re-review process. In all five re-reviews, following judgements of no confidence in academic standards or failing in an aspect of the quality of learning opportunities, the colleges concerned had analysed the areas for further development raised by the previous review and taken effective action to rectify them. In each case, the re-review resulted in judgements of confidence in academic standards and approved or commendable for each aspect of the quality of learning opportunities.

## Introduction: the findings of Academic review

1 This report provides a summary of the findings of the Academic reviews of directly and consortium-funded higher education in further education colleges (colleges) in England between September 2005 and July 2007. This is the third in a series of reports which summarises the findings of the Academic review of higher education in colleges published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The earlier reports are *Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England* and *Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England 2003-05*. This new report will contribute to a further report *Learning from Academic review of higher education in further education colleges in England 2002-07* which will consider the development of higher education in colleges in England over the full cycle of Academic review. QAA carried out 51 reviews at the request of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Five of the reviews were re-reviews of colleges that had received a no confidence judgement in standards and/or a failing judgement for one or more aspects of the quality of learning opportunities in previous years' reviews.

2 The chief purposes of the report are:

- to highlight elements of good practice identified by the reviewers
- to assist current and potential providers in developing and enhancing their higher education provision.

3 Within this report, the identification of good practice is based upon an individual college's use of the Academic Infrastructure, a set of documents which provides a means of describing academic standards in United Kingdom higher education. The Academic Infrastructure consists of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, subject benchmark statements, award benchmark statements such as the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* and programme specifications. The reviewers have paid close attention to these documents and have identified for comment some of the ways in which colleges have addressed the intentions of the Academic Infrastructure and introduced changes in their practice. Pinpointing this good practice is key to enabling colleges to build on their strengths and to identify areas for further development.

4 The reviews were conducted in 46 colleges across England. The colleges ranged from those serving large conurbations, for example Manchester, Newcastle and Birmingham, to colleges serving dispersed rural areas such as the East Riding of Yorkshire and North Shropshire. Colleges also ranged from specialist institutions providing subjects such as Art and Design, and Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, to large general further education colleges offering a range of arts, science and technology subjects. Three colleges each had two separate reviews during the period 2005-07 (not including re-reviews), and 11 colleges elected to have two different subject areas reviewed at the same time in a single aggregate review.

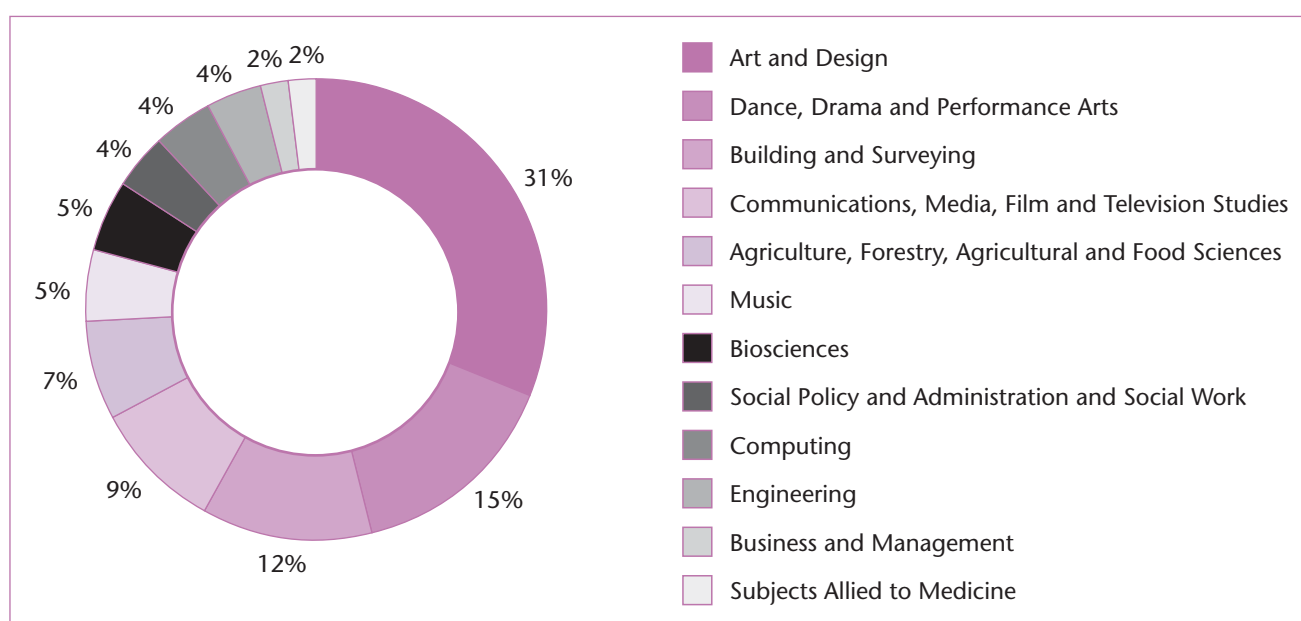
5 The reviews were conducted in accordance with the *Handbook for Academic review*, published in 2000, and with reference to the *Handbook for academic review: England, 2004: For review of directly funded higher education in further education colleges*. The reviews included programmes within the following subject areas:

- Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences
- Art and Design
- Biosciences
- Building and Surveying
- Business and Management
- Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies
- Computing
- Dance, Drama and Performance Arts
- Engineering
- Music
- Social Policy and Administration and Social Work
- Subjects Allied to Medicine

6 The full list of subjects reviewed at each college is given in Annex 1. Art and Design was the largest subject area reviewed, comprising 12 single subject reviews, six aggregate reviews and one re-review. This is closely followed by Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, with three single subject reviews and six aggregate reviews.

7 The distribution of the 51 reviews across subjects is shown in Figure 1 below.

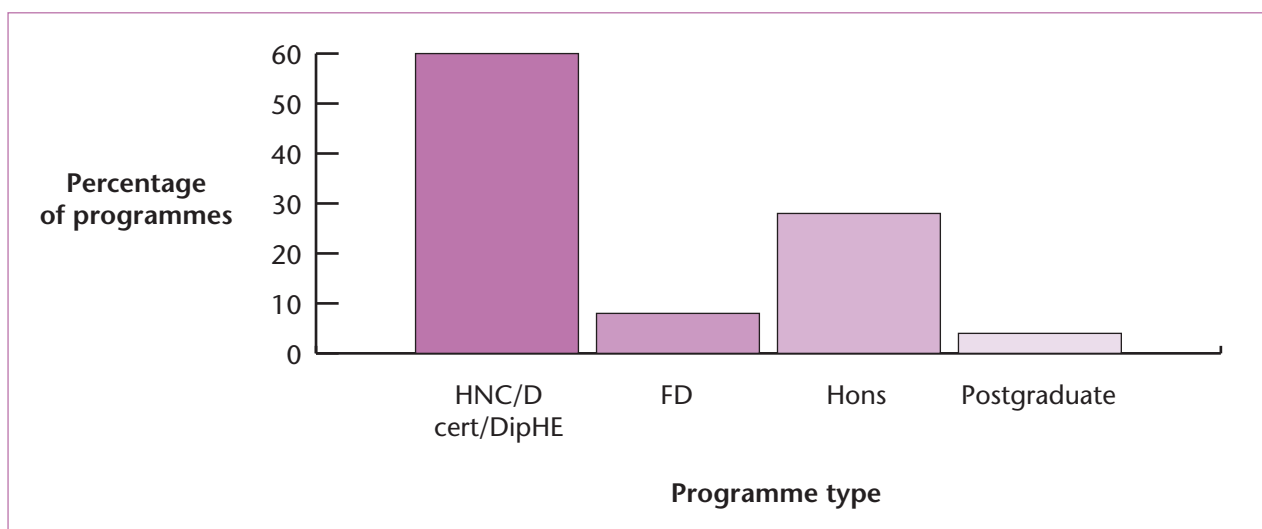
**Figure 1: Reviews in 2005-07 by subject**



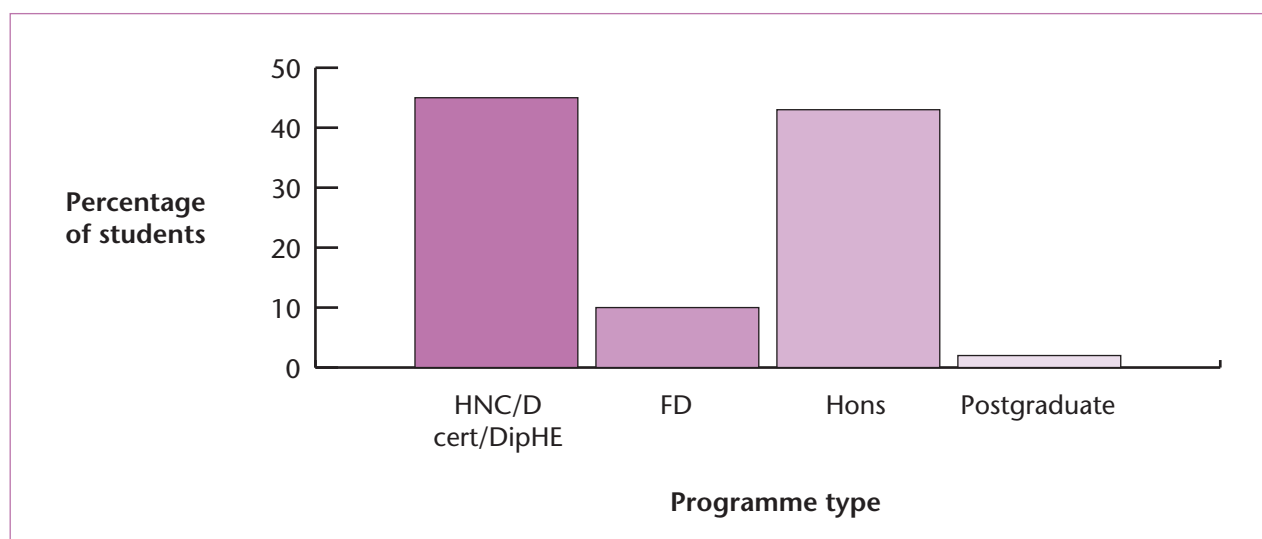


8 Student statistics for this report are taken from the colleges' responses to QAA's scope and preference survey carried out to assist with planning and scheduling prior to the start of each round of reviews. These data show that over 6,000 students were registered on the programmes reviewed, with 70 per cent studying full-time. Of the programmes reviewed, 45 per cent of students were on programmes leading to Edexcel Higher National Certificates or Diplomas (HNC/D), about 10 per cent registered on Foundation Degrees, 43 per cent on honours degrees and 2 per cent on postgraduate diplomas and/or master's degrees. The distribution of programmes reviewed was 60 per cent HNC/D, 8 per cent Foundation Degree, 28 per cent honours degrees and 4 per cent postgraduate. While a significant majority of programmes reviewed were at the intermediate level of the FHEQ, actual numbers of students studying intermediate and honours level qualifications were roughly the same.

**Figure 2: Distribution of types of programme reviewed**



**Figure 3: Distribution of students across programme types**



## Judgements on academic standards

9 Of the 51 Academic reviews carried out, five were re-reviews, all of which resulted in judgements of confidence, showing a clear improvement in standards for these programmes. Table 1 summarises the judgement in academic standards for the 46 first reviews and table 2 shows the improvement in judgements in academic standards from the first reviews to the five re-reviews. The reviewers found no confidence in just six programmes across three reviews; 94 per cent of reviews resulted in confidence judgements. In the Academic review method, the reviewers make separate judgements for each subject in an aggregate review, where more than one subject is reviewed at the same time. They may also make separate judgements for different levels of award or subject. An example of this can be seen in one review where the reviewers had confidence in the academic standards of the undergraduate provision and limited confidence in the academic standards of the postgraduate provision. In the other differentiated judgement, the reviewers had no confidence in programmes in one subject reviewed, but had confidence in programmes in another subject.

**Table 1: Academic reviews 2004-06 and 2005-07: Judgements on academic standards for first reviews**

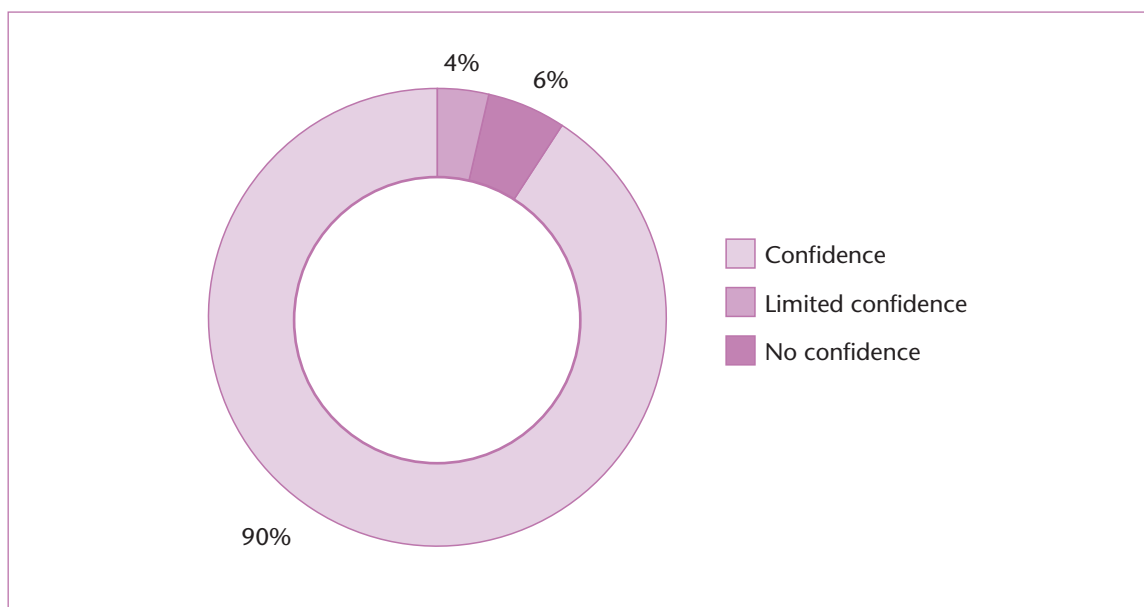
Outcome	Academic standards for 46 first reviews
Confidence	41
Limited confidence	1
No confidence	2
Differentiated by subject or level of award	1 (confidence/no confidence) 1 (confidence/limited confidence)

**Table 2: Academic reviews 2005-06 and 2006-07: Judgements on academic standards for re-reviews**

Outcome	Academic standards for first reviews in 2004-06	Academic standards for re-reviews in 2005-07
Confidence	0	5
Limited confidence	1	0
No confidence	2	0
Differentiated by subject or level of award	1 (confidence/limited confidence) 1 (confidence/no confidence)	0

**Figure 4: Judgements on academic standards**

(Note: the differentiated judgements have been counted in each category)



### Judgements on the quality of learning opportunities

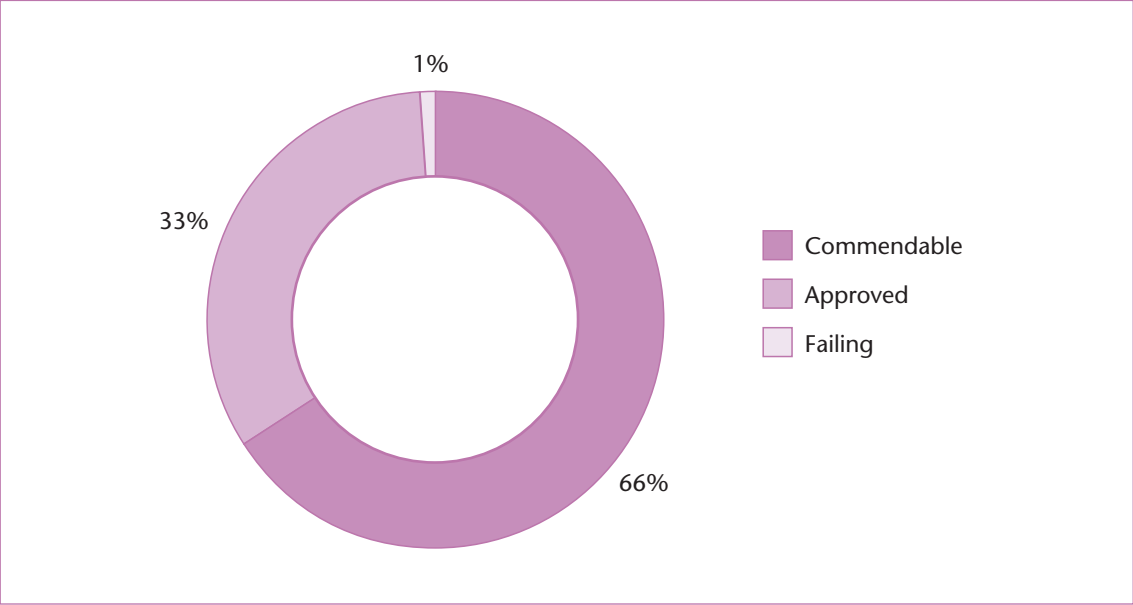
10 For the quality of learning opportunities, judgements are made on three aspects: Teaching and learning; Student progression; and Learning resources. Ninety-nine per cent of all judgements on these aspects of the quality of learning opportunities were commendable or approved. No provision was judged to be failing in its entirety, with only a total of three programmes in two colleges receiving a judgement of failing in one aspect.

11 Learning resources is the least successful area with fewer commendable judgements than the other aspects and around twice as many approved judgements as for Student progression or for Teaching and learning. The most frequent reasons for approved judgements in Learning resources include a lack of up-to-date facilities, a limited range of facilities, including books and journals, or restricted access to appropriate resources.

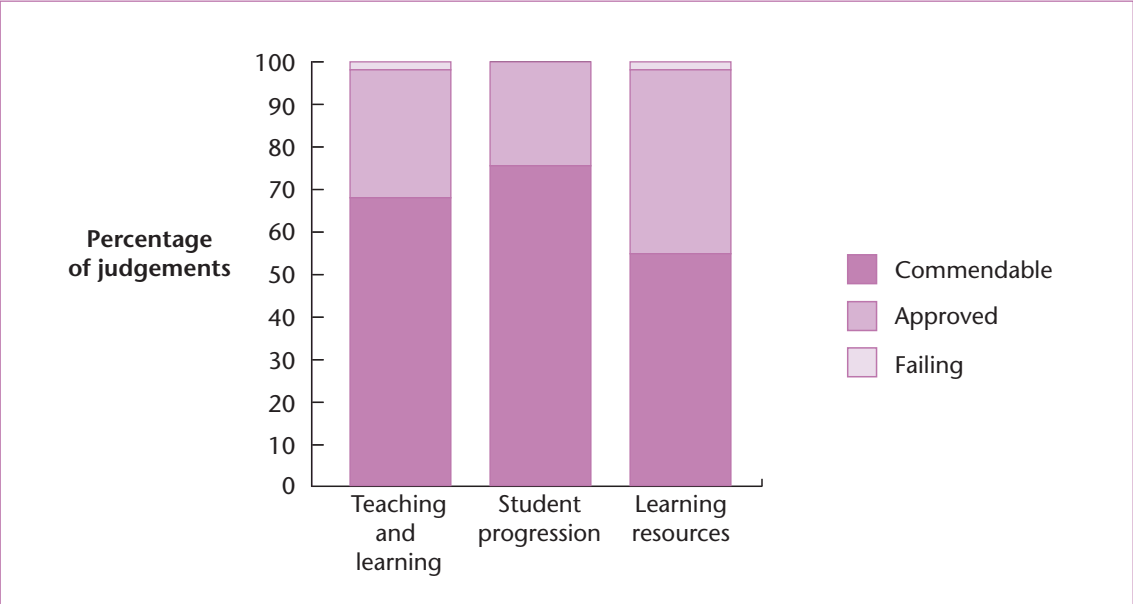
**Table 3: Judgements on the quality of learning opportunities**

Outcome	Teaching and learning	Student progression	Learning resources
Commendable	33	37	27
Approved	14	11	22
Failing	0	0	0
Differentiated by subject or level of award	3 (commendable/approved) 1 (approved/failing)	3 (commendable/approved)	1 (commendable/approved) 1 (commendable/failing)

**Figure 5: Judgements on the quality of learning opportunities (across all aspects)**  
(Note: the differentiated judgements have been counted in each category)



**Figure 6: Judgements on the quality of learning opportunities for each aspect**



### Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

12 In the final section of the review report, the reviewers evaluate the college's ability to maintain academic standards and enhance the quality of learning opportunities in the particular subject reviewed. Reviewers look at the arrangements for programme review, student evaluations, external examiner reports and processes for the conduct of academic assessment, marking and feedback to students and evaluate the effectiveness of these procedures and the consistency with which they are applied. The reviewers found that most colleges have well established and effective quality assurance processes, but that they were not always applied fully to all programmes or subjects reviewed. A number of colleges rely on a model designed for further education to meet the requirement of the Learning and Skills Council and Ofsted. This model does not provide separate information about higher education students or their programmes and leads to a lack of specific evidence to inform the planning and enhancement of the college's higher education provision.

13 Most reports identify the responsiveness of colleges to student views as a significant strength. Student representatives on college committees report outcomes of meetings to other students orally and by making minutes of meetings available on noticeboards. Often, however, colleges continue to rely on informal contacts to supplement meetings and questionnaire surveys. While students appreciate this informal contact, it does not provide secure or documented information which could be used to improve the management and delivery of higher education programmes.

## Overview of the outcomes from Academic review

### Academic standards

#### Aims

14 Almost without exception, colleges' aims take account of their mission, vision or strategy statements. Themes common to the majority of colleges include '...to act positively to widen participation to realise creative and academic potential' [Basingstoke College of Technology: Art and Design, SR03/2005]; to '...provide a vocational higher education progression route for students within the college and facilitate their professional qualification and/or advancement' [City of Westminster College: Biosciences, SR08/2005]; to '...develop in students a range of skills and techniques, personal qualities and attitudes essential for successful performance in working life' [Newcastle College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR21/2005].

15 The vocational nature of college provision features strongly in college aims. For example, to '...provide specialist vocational education, linked to professional body requirements and National Occupational Standards where appropriate' [Blackpool and The Fylde College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR40/2005]. They also generally mention links to local or wider economies '...to contribute to the development of local, regional and national economies through a curriculum offer which addresses the recognised needs of employers and the creative sector' [Dewsbury College: Art and Design, SR16/2006]. Many examples of aims also mention the need to engage with local employers, '...to involve employers in the design of the programme in order to ensure its validity and maximise opportunities for the students to enter employment' [East Riding College: Computing, SR13/2006].

16 Aims to enable colleges to meet their widening participation aspirations often refer to full-time employment and progression to higher-level study, such as to '...provide mature students and/or students in full-time employment with the opportunity to study a higher education programme [Stockport College of Further and Higher Education: Building and Surveying, SR29/2005]. Less apparent are aims to facilitate enhancement activities in learning, teaching and assessment, such as to '...encourage good practice in the delivery and assessment of teaching and learning' [West Thames College: Art and Design, and Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR20/2005] and to '...strengthen the ability to learn and be self-reliant and self-motivated in order to have the confidence for independent learning and study' [Kensington and Chelsea College: Art and Design, SR10/2006].

17 Nearly all colleges include the development of non subject-specific skills in their aims, either explicitly through including reference to transferable skills, or by including a more generic aim. Examples include '...to develop transferable skills which enable learners to engage with novel situations that demand insight, innovation and the ability to coordinate a range of tasks' [Huddersfield Technical College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR 14/2006] or '...to equip individuals with knowledge, understanding and skills for success in employment' [Derby College:

Engineering, SR15/2006]. Comments made by students, graduates and employers indicate that the provision and acquisition of such skills is an important feature of colleges' higher education provision.

#### Summary of features of good practice: Aims

- the vocational nature of college provision which features strongly in college aims (paragraph 15)
- aims that often reflect the need to engage with local employers (paragraph 15)
- aims that enable colleges to meet their widening participation aspirations often mention full-time employment and progression to higher-level study (paragraph 16)
- aims which include explicitly the development of non subject-specific skills (paragraph 17).

#### Intended learning outcomes

18 The majority of reports indicate that intended learning outcomes are clearly defined and that appropriate account is being taken of the Academic Infrastructure. Intended learning outcomes consistently relate well to the overall aims of programmes, are clearly stated and are appropriate to the level of the award. Programme specifications are now firmly established in colleges, with only one case reported of these not being provided.

19 Colleges are engaging effectively with the FHEQ with only four cases reported of intended learning outcomes which do not differentiate sufficiently between programmes or offer limited challenge to students. Examples of good practice include: '...appropriate external reference points inform the intended learning outcomes, which have been mapped against the FHEQ' [Basingstoke College of Technology: Art and Design, SR03/2005]; '...the expectations of the progressive levels of study are appropriate and mirror those of the FHEQ' [City of Bath College: Building and Surveying, SR05/2005]; and, '...all programmes have clearly stated intended learning outcomes mapped against relevant external reference points' [West Thames College: Art and Design/Dance, Drama and Performing Arts, SR20/2005]. In the four cases where reports note an absence of intended learning outcomes for each level of programme, the distinctiveness of individual programmes was difficult to discern. In these examples, this was particularly the case for HNC and HND programmes.

20 A large number of reports note that subject benchmark statements are being used to inform the development of intended learning outcomes. Many colleges make effective use of subject benchmark statements to develop intended learning outcomes which relate to the vocational nature of their programmes. A number of reports note that colleges have developed intended learning outcomes which encourage progression to employment or further study in line with college aims. For example the 'intended learning outcomes...prepare students for further study and employment and meet the needs of local employers and the community' [New College Nottingham: Building and Surveying, SR12/2005]. In most of these cases, reviewers also note that the intended learning outcomes have been informed by the requirements of relevant professional bodies.

21 Intended learning outcomes are generally communicated clearly to students using a wide variety of documentation including programme specifications, student handbooks, unit or module descriptors and assessment briefs. In addition, many colleges provide time at the start of each module to ensure that students are fully aware of the unit or module intended learning outcomes. The majority of reports indicate that intended learning outcomes are defined and documented clearly and are understood by students. However, seven reports note inconsistencies in the presentation of intended learning outcomes between the various documents provided by colleges. For example, there are examples of aims and intended learning outcomes in student handbooks or unit descriptions which vary from those published in the programme specifications. There are other examples of confusion between intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria, leading to the intended learning outcomes of some units being inappropriately used as assessment criteria and also leading to the development of unclear assignment briefs. In such cases, the reviewers noted that the connection between intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria and evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes was not clear to students.

### **Summary of features of good practice: Intended learning outcomes**

- appropriate account is taken of the Academic Infrastructure (paragraphs 18 to 20)
- intended learning outcomes which prepare students for further study and employment and meet the needs of local employers (paragraph 20)
- intended learning outcomes are informed by the requirements of relevant professional bodies (paragraph 20)
- intended learning outcomes are clearly communicated to students using a wide variety of documentation and this is supplemented by further information during module or unit induction (paragraph 21).

## Curricula

22 A strong common feature of the curricula is that they are informed by current professional and occupational needs and practices and are technically and vocationally challenging. The majority of reports note the opportunities provided for students to interrelate theory and practice and for critical reflection on practice within the curricula. This is usually combined with flexible design and delivery to meet the diverse needs of full and part-time students. Most reports comment that curricula are enriched through formal and informal employer influence on curricula design, as well as staff engagement in updating their skills and subject knowledge. A few reports indicate a need for more employer and professional body contribution to enhance the currency of the curricula. The scholarly activities of staff are having a limited impact on curricula design and content and remain a matter to be addressed by many colleges. In many cases this is balanced against the work experience opportunities provided by colleges for students and through the contributions from visiting practitioners and lecturers. This theme is covered in more detail in the Teaching and learning section below.



23 Curricula design and content generally encourage the students' achievement of the intended learning outcomes and the acquisition of relevant subject knowledge and key skills. Project work is used by many colleges to develop individual and group skills '...challenging project work that enables students of different levels of ability to realise their full potential' [Macclesfield College: Art and Design, SR30/2005]; '...Software Development projects that are industry-sponsored and of noteworthy quality' [East Riding College: Computing, SR13/2006]; and, '...students' projects based upon live working projects, which showed their ability to work independently and enabled them to develop report-writing skills and work-based research' [Newbury College: Engineering, SR05/2006]. A few reports indicate that the development of analytical thinking, research and critical evaluation skills presents a continuing challenge to some staff and students. For some HND programmes the rationale for the sequencing of H1 and H2 units is not clear, particularly where more H2 units were scheduled in the first year of study.

24 Curricula are updated and amended in the majority of colleges through a process of annual review, which often involves consultation with employers. A small minority of reports indicate an absence of formal mechanisms for employer contributions in order to enhance the currency of curricula and some note that employers wish to have more formal involvement in the development of curricula.

25 Many reports emphasise the importance of choice within the curricula and its contribution to enhancing the depth and breadth of student learning. Examples of good practice include the provision of various study pathways offering clear and appropriate progression to further study and employment [City College Birmingham: Building and Surveying, SR03/2006] and '...a choice of pathways being offered that allow students to pursue alternative careers' [Stockport College of Further and Higher Education: Building and Surveying, SR29/2005]. Flexibility and choice in curricula are particularly valued by students wishing to progress to degree-level study [Leeds College of Art and Design: Art and Design, SR28/2005; City of Sunderland College: Art and Design, SR22/2005]. Core and elective modules are a feature of HNC/D programmes offering flexibility and student choice [Chesterfield College: Computing, SR02/2005]. However, in one report, the reviewers commented that there were no elective modules and therefore students did not have any choice within the curricula.

#### Summary of features of good practice: Curricula

- employer influence on the design of curricula and staff engagement in updating their skills and subject knowledge which generally helps to enrich curricula (paragraph 22)
- due consideration of current professional and occupational needs and practices and appropriate technical and vocational challenges (paragraphs 22 and 23)
- choice of option and elective modules within the curricula which enhances the depth and breadth of student learning (paragraph 25).

## Assessment

26 The *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*, summarises good practice in assessment. The colleges which were reviewed in 2005-07 have shown a more formal approach to using the *Code of practice* than colleges in earlier rounds of

academic review to produce and to improve their own assessment strategies. In particular, the *Code of practice* is referred to in programme specifications and approval documentation and colleges have stated that it has been useful in the development of their assessment strategies. Colleges which had re-reviews have paid particular attention to improving assessment strategies since their previous reviews and have made effective use of the *Code of practice* in doing this. A good example of this can be seen in one re-review, where the college has formalised moderation, improved external examiner forms, reviewed student workloads, reconsidered compensation rules and familiarised staff with the Academic Infrastructure [Dewsbury College: Art and Design, SR16/2006]. For programmes validated by Edexcel there is less evidence of colleges' engagement with the *Code of practice*, *Section 4: External examining*, and in some cases there are less formal processes for responding to external examiners and for the operation of assessment boards.

27 The majority of reports comment positively on colleges' overall assessment strategies. For example, '...the assessment strategy...ensures the use of a commendable variety of assessment methods, is closely linked to professional requirements and incorporates appropriate elements of student placement experience' [Bromley College of Further and Higher Education: Social Policy and Administration and Social Work, SR12/2006]. In many cases, the strategy is clearly communicated to and understood by students, staff and external examiners. These assessment strategies provide staff with general frameworks to support programme management of assessment processes, for example in relation to sampling for second-marking and sending work to the external examiner [Stockport College of Further and Higher Education: Building and Surveying, SR29/2005].

28 The careful development of clearly thought out schedules for completing assessments to enable students to plan their work is a positive feature of assessment practice. Another example of this is the clear statement of procedures for the submission of late work, in accordance with precept five of the *Code of practice*, *Section 6: Assessment of students*. Colleges' assessment strategies usually provide guidelines for the return of marked student work in a timely manner. These guidelines are, in the majority of cases, fulfilled, and timely feedback is much appreciated by students. Reviewers found no formal written assessment strategy in only three reviews, and in a fourth review the lack of a student handbook meant there was no general statement on assessment for students to refer to.

29 Generally, assessment methods are sufficiently varied, contextualised, challenging and clearly designed to measure student achievement of learning outcomes. The majority of Edexcel validated programmes demonstrate a wide variety of assessment methods being used for both formative and summative assessments. Review reports show that the majority of assessment tasks are clearly designed to be appropriate for different subjects. Reports also make reference to a wide range of carefully considered and, in many cases, imaginative assessment methods. Formative assessments form a key part of most assessment strategies. In general, assessment practices promote effective learning. For example, the use of self-reflective accounts was a feature of good practice which gave students an opportunity to relate their assessments to their own experience [City College Manchester: Art and Design, SR04/2005; Northbrook College, Sussex: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts/Music, SR01/2005; Stockport College of Further and Higher Education: Building and Surveying, SR29/2005].

30 Some reports identify difficulties in assessment design. In one case, the reviewers considered that the over-reliance on coursework could disadvantage students progressing to other higher education programmes which use examinations. Several other reports note that some assessments for Edexcel validated programmes are designed so that students need to complete additional work to achieve a Merit or Distinction grade. This discourages some students from attempting to achieve the higher grades. In four cases, one including a master's programme, assessments place too much emphasis on the development of the students' technical ability at the expense of their knowledge and analytical and cognitive skills. As a consequence these assessments offer insufficient challenges to students.

31 Generally, assessment criteria are set at the appropriate levels, and make clear links to learning outcomes. Students are made aware of assessment criteria in programme handbooks, and, in the best cases, in more detailed guidance for individual assignments. In almost all reports, assessment criteria are readily available and clearly understood by students. One college developed general 'Plain Speak' assessment criteria to make the assessment process more comprehensible to students [Basingstoke College of Technology: Art and Design, SR03/2005]. Assessment criteria are designed to assist staff to discriminate between levels of performance. In some cases, criteria do not distinguish clearly between Distinction, Merit and Pass grades for units in Edexcel HNC/D programmes and this has led to some confusion for students. However, during this round of reviews, Edexcel released additional guidance on grading criteria which has proved helpful: 'The first year of the HNC Construction uses the new Edexcel scheme, in which the important qualitative criteria setting the boundary between Pass, Merit and Distinction grades are better defined' [City of Bristol College: Building and Surveying SR19/2005].

32 The majority of colleges have rigorous internal verification and moderation processes. Most reports indicate that student work is fairly and consistently marked and at the appropriate level. For example, reviewers cite as good practice '...double and blind marking of assignments are monitored through the tracking of double-marking practice, and a standardised assignment to assessment template ensures an even application of the process that is understood by staff and students [City of Sunderland College: Art and Design, SR22/2005]. Reviewers frequently note that colleges are providing training for staff in assessing students: 'All staff involved in the assessment process are supported by a system of training and mentoring and are assisted in this by the small size of both the subject team and the student cohorts. This leads to a robust and transparent grading process' [New College Telford: Music, SR04/2006]. Most colleges have clear procedures for defining, detecting and dealing with plagiarism, including, in one case, the use of electronic checks to reduce the possibility of plagiarism [Macclesfield College: Art and Design, SR30/2005]. In cases where such procedures were absent, the reviewers found many examples of undetected plagiarism in the samples of student work. Where the reviewers found ineffective internal verification, this was usually linked to a need for a more formal recording system.

33 Review reports confirm that written feedback on student work is usually extensive and indicates how students can improve and enhance their learning [Blackpool and The Fylde College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR40/2006; Newcastle College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR21/2005; Accrington and Rossendale

College: Music, SR23/2006]. Students benefit most where feedback makes careful reference to learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Reviewers found that in colleges which do not use a standardised feedback form or use different types of form, feedback tends to be less consistent and there is an over-reliance on oral or informal feedback [City of Bath College: Building and Surveying, SR05/2005; Newbury College: Engineering, SR05/2006; Stratford-upon-Avon College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR07/2006]. Many students are receiving detailed feedback which enables them to see how they can improve their work. For other students, however, written feedback is too brief to provide sufficient detail to inform students on how to improve their work, and some assessment forms adopt a tick-box approach which leaves little room for detailed comment.

34 In completing practical projects, students are increasingly encouraged to make effective use of their workplace, work experience or work placements which form part of their programmes of study. Where practical work and work experience form part of the learning experience, assignment briefs emphasise the linking of theory and practice, encourage students to make use of live projects and scenarios from their place of work or attachment and, where required, make links to professional requirements. This is best summed up in one report which states that '...assignment tasks employ realistic scenarios drawn from work-based projects, to allow students to apply their skills within professional roles' [Bradford College: Art and Design, SR14/2005]. Another report comments that '...assessment is sensitive to the needs of the professional body and contexts', and that work-based staff are involved in feedback and the assessment process. Checks are made by module tutors to verify grades [North East Surrey College of Technology: Biosciences, SR17/2005]. A major strength of the colleges is their close working relationships with employers to ensure that there are well-designed work-related assignments and rigorous processes to assess the work-related element of students' learning in these programmes.

### Summary of features of good practice: assessment

- assessment which is underpinned by explicit use of the *Code of practice* (paragraph 26)
- assessment strategies which provide staff with clear frameworks for managing their assessment processes and are understood by students, staff and external examiners (paragraph 27)
- varied, contextualised and challenging assessments which are designed to measure student achievement of learning outcomes (paragraph 29)
- internal verification procedures which are rigorous; marking which is fair, consistent and at the appropriate level (paragraph 32)
- detailed written feedback which is supportive of student learning especially when standard feedback forms are used (paragraph 33)
- the close working relationships between colleges and employers which promote the development of vocationally relevant programmes, well-designed work-related assignments and rigorous processes to assess the work-related element of students' learning (paragraph 34).

## Student achievement

35 Overwhelmingly, reports confirm that students are achieving the intended learning outcomes set for their programmes in line with the level of awards and in accordance with the FHEQ. In colleges offering undergraduate degree programmes, many students are achieving awards of Upper Second class honours or better. On HNC/D programmes, student achievements are impressive, with many students receiving Distinction and Merit grades for each unit. Students are also able to demonstrate that they are meeting professional standards where these apply. Many programmes enable students to achieve registration with professional bodies. Where colleges have maintained accurate records, they have been able to demonstrate cases where students have progressed to further study and to show that students have performed well at a higher academic level [City of Wolverhampton College: Business and Management, SR11/2006; Boston College: Social Policy and Administration and Social Work, SR06/2006; Chesterfield College: Computing, SR02/2005].

36 In the best examples, students are displaying a high level of subject-specific knowledge and personal and transferable skills. For example, for some students on programmes with an emphasis on creative practical skills, such as art and design, music and dance, much of their work is of a high standard of creativity and/or performance. Where students have the opportunity to display their work, one report notes that students have '...successes in national competitions, public exhibitions of work, publications, and live projects' [Cleveland College of Art and Design: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR18/2005]. In another case, students have gone on to achieve '...considerable success in the horticultural area with some being medallists at national flower shows' [Pershore Group of Colleges: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR13/2005].

37 Student achievements represent significant added-value given that many entered their programmes with modest qualifications: 'The programmes attract students with a range of non-traditional entry qualifications, and most demonstrate a high level of personal achievement. Both employers and students believe that these programmes enhance student achievement in personal, academic, employment and professional contexts' [Bradford College: Building and Surveying, SR27/2005].

38 At the time of the reviews, the first cohorts of students had not yet completed their Foundation Degree programmes and so there was only limited achievement data for the reviewers to consider. Where the reviewers were able to comment, they made favourable statements on students' achievements, including, for example, highly complimentary comments on Foundation Degrees in Music and Performance Arts '.....music production and performance student work showed some sophisticated technical and creative achievement in the higher assessment bands - confirming the practical strengths in music production noted by external examiners' [Northbrook College, Sussex: Dance, Drama and Performing Arts/Music, SR01/2005]. Students' achievements in the workplace are also noted. For example, one report states that students are '...able to evaluate their practice in the workplace and make recommendations for enhanced management' [Warwickshire College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR37/2005].



39 Students' high level of progression to employment is as a result of colleges establishing close links with business and industry and of programmes ensuring the vocational relevance of curricula and assessment tasks. For example, in one college around 70 per cent of degree students progressed to employment. Programmes are successful in providing students with knowledge and skills to enable them to gain employment and progress to further study. Typically, for example, one report notes that '...students achieving the HNC has resulted in their promotion or opened up new career opportunities, and, in other cases, enabled them to progress to degree programmes' [City of Wolverhampton College: Business and Management, SR11/2006]. The reviewers report frequently on how work-linked projects promote students' achievement '...students' projects are based upon live working projects, which showed their ability to work independently and enabled them to develop report writing skills and work-based research' [Newbury College: Engineering, SR05/2006].

40 The reviewers found that where students are already in employment, colleges provide them with the confidence and ability to seek advancement in their work. For example, one report noted that students '...are developing the professional knowledge and skills necessary to enhance their job satisfaction and career prospects' [North East Surrey College of Technology: Subjects Allied to Medicine, SR31/2005].

41 When employers met with the reviewers in 12 of the reviews, reports state that most employers are highly positive about students' development of knowledge and skills. For example, '...employers confirmed that the HE programmes are preparing employees for progression at work. Examples quoted include roles as supervisors, cell leaders and managers' [Derby College: Engineering, SR15/2006]. Employers also comment on '...the contribution students make to the firm to which they are attached' [Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: Art and Design, SR38/2005]. Students on Higher National programmes acquire vocationally relevant skills and are appropriately prepared for employment [Accrington and Rossendale College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR01/2006; Blackpool and The Fylde College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR40/2006; Bradford College: Art and Design, SR14/2005].

42 External examiners report favourably on the achievement of students and point in particular to their achievements in areas such as dissertations, practical work and work-related projects [Stamford College: Art and Design, SR36/2005; Blackpool and The Fylde College: Dance, Drama and Performing Arts, SR40/2006]. External examiners comment positively on students' abilities to link theory and practice, to make creative use of their places of work in their projects and, in the best cases, to make use of academic and professional sources in their research. The more able students demonstrate appropriate abilities in the areas of analysis, problem-solving and critical thinking [East Riding College: Computing, SR13/2006]. Where the external examiners and the reviewers have identified issues for consideration, these are mainly concerned with the scope for improvement of students' critical, theoretical and analytical skills, with inadequate referencing of work, or insufficient accessing of a wide range of academic materials.

43 Completion rates for programmes are generally high, especially after the first year, with one report noting that '...there are high rates of student completion and graduation' and '...the completion rate shows a year-on-year improvement, rising to 72 per cent for the 2003 cohort' [Hull College: Dance, Drama and Performing Arts, SR02/2006; Suffolk College, Ipswich: Biosciences, SR41/2005]. There are a few instances of low completion rates with only around 29 per cent of students who enrolled completing their programmes and gaining the award. Usually staff are taking action to address such issues: 'The subject team has reacted to the disappointing completion data for full-time and for some non laboratory-based part-time students in the last two academic sessions by revising the delivery schedule of modules, delaying assessments and providing enhanced access to practical classes' [North East Surrey College of Technology: Biosciences, SR17/2005].

#### **Summary of good practice: Student achievement**

- students are achieving the aims and intended learning outcomes set for their programmes and in accordance with the FHEQ level descriptor for their awards (paragraph 35)
- student achievement represents significant added-value for those who joined their courses with modest qualifications (paragraph 37)
- students of Foundation Degrees in Music and Performance Arts are achieving work of a particularly high standard (paragraph 38)
- programmes are successful in providing students with knowledge and skills to enable them to gain employment and progress to further study (paragraph 39)
- students are able to link theory and practice, to make creative use of their places of work in their projects and, in the best cases, to make use of academic and professional sources in their research (paragraph 42).

## Quality of learning opportunities

### Teaching and learning

44 The reviewers generally comment positively about the development of higher education teaching and learning strategies in colleges. The majority of colleges have teaching and learning strategies, although not all (around 12 per cent) have strategies that are specific to their higher education provision. Around 40 per cent of reports confirm that colleges have higher education strategies which are comprehensive, effective and well established [Bradford College: Building and Surveying, SR27/2005] or are in the process of being implemented, in most cases successfully [Gateshead College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR16/2005; New College Nottingham: Building and Surveying, SR12/2005; Warwickshire College, Royal Leamington Spa, Rugby and Moreton Morrell: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR10/2005]. A notable feature of these strategies is an acute awareness of the implications for teaching and learning of widening access to higher education and of student profiles which include students from backgrounds where there is no experience of higher education [City of Sunderland College: Art and Design, SR22/2005].

45 Colleges employ a broad range of teaching and learning methods suitable for the subject areas and the level of the award. Examples of good practice in teaching and learning incorporate a programme of taught sessions balanced by independent study which encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Such methods are often characterised by progression from more didactic first-year approaches toward independent learning in the later stages of the programme [Dewsbury College: Art and Design, SR16/2006]. Students are aware of this approach as illustrated by comments such as '...students confirmed learning methods change as they progress to provide more autonomy for their own learning' [Derby College: Engineering, SR15/2006], and '...a range of teaching and learning methods is used which encourages students to learn independently and experientially' [North Warwickshire and Hinckley College: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR32/2005].

46 A common feature in the majority of reports is that teaching and learning are underpinned by the commitment, support and accessibility of staff and that '...staff are able to draw on their professional experience in their teaching' [Accrington and Rossendale College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR01/2006]. Reports indicate widespread good practice in relation to the variety of methodologies implemented by colleges to support their diverse student populations. Examples include '...an emphasis on communication and presentational skills enables students to become confident in articulating their practice' [Kensington and Chelsea College: Art and Design, SR10/2006]; '...the *Skills Day* during the first year of the programme and a two-day residential skills session in the second year are both found to be beneficial and enjoyable by students' [City of Wolverhampton College: Business and Management, SR11/2006]. The vocational nature of the majority of higher education provision is generally supported by teaching approaches which include real life case-studies, work-based learning, site visits and teaching which is supported and enriched by contributions from visiting practitioners. A challenge for a number of colleges is to ensure that for students registered on different awards at different levels,



and taught in the same group, the teaching is appropriately demanding for each student. A few reports indicate that the use of virtual learning environments and other interactive learning is still in its infancy and its use is overstated by colleges in their self-evaluations.

47 Teaching and learning programmes are typically enriched and updated by contributions from practising professionals, study visits, employer engagement and staff experience of professional practice. Examples include: '...content is current and topical and is largely informed and refreshed by the regular continual professional development undertaken by staff' [Lambeth College: Building and Surveying, SR17/2006]. Many reports also refer to the contribution that staff with industrial or professional experience make to supporting students in their work-related projects [North East Surrey College of Technology: Subjects Allied to Medicine, SR31/2005; Mid-Cheshire College: Art and Design, SR38/2005; Blackpool and The Fylde College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR40/2006]. Staff expertise is sometimes supplemented through excellent links with employers where employers contribute to student learning. For example, '...the College and employers work closely together to ensure that students make full use of their work experiences in their campus learning' [Newbury College: Engineering, SR05/2006].

48 Most colleges have implemented systems to enable them to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning they provide. Schemes for the annual peer observations of teaching are widespread, although in many cases the schemes are designed to inform staff appraisal processes as much as the enhancement of teaching and learning. The better examples of successful schemes are recognised by staff as a useful tool for enhancing their teaching practice, particularly where college learning development teams have been involved [West Thames College: Art and Design, and Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR20/2005]. The main theme in the majority of reports can be summarised by '...current and former students and employers spoke very positively about the high quality of the teaching' [Derby College: Engineering, SR15/2006].

#### Summary of features of good practice: Teaching and learning

- well-developed teaching and learning strategies which address higher education provision, inform students of the challenges of higher education programmes and support staff in the development of a higher education ethos (paragraph 44)
- a broad range of teaching and learning methods suitable for the subject areas and the level of the award (paragraph 45)
- vocational nature of the majority of higher education provision which are supported by teaching approaches which include real life case-studies, work-based learning, site visits and teaching enriched by contributions from visiting practitioners (paragraph 46)
- tutors' approaches to learning and teaching, and in particular their subject expertise and their industrial/professional experience which they use to great effect in classes (paragraph 47)
- schemes for the peer observation of teaching which staff regard as useful for enhancing their teaching practice, particularly where college learning development teams have been involved (paragraph 48).

### Student progression

49 The admissions process is commonly seen as a considerable strength. The most effective practice involves extensive preparation before the formal admission of students to their programmes. This may include staff visits to schools and colleges, open days or evenings, taster sessions and the opportunity to sit in on classes, and the wide distribution of user-friendly documentation ranging from recruitment pamphlets to college prospectuses and, if appropriate, close cooperation with employers. Colleges frequently use interviews designed to encourage the motivation of potential students, but also to give potential students a realistic idea of the level of commitment demanded by the programmes. The interviews are also used, along with diagnostic tests, to target support for learning needs.

50 In most colleges there is a well-organised and very helpful induction for new students. This covers college-wide and subject-specific matters. In the best cases, induction is focused on the needs of new students, and clarifies the distinctive nature of higher education, such as the requirements of independent study. Examples include: 'Students progressing from further education are informed of the key differences between further education and higher education; a programme of study skills, delivered in the first semester, supports the development of guided self-study' [New College Nottingham: Building and Surveying, SR12/2005]. A programme handbook is usually distributed as part of the induction process. Some are good; however, others are reported as inadequate in content and unappealing in appearance. The reviewers noted in particular, non-existent or misleading guidance on plagiarism and referencing. Where the reviewers have read handbooks for different programmes in the same college they note that the handbooks sometimes differ widely in style and content and would benefit from the sharing of good practice across programmes.

51 Progression rates for the degree courses are good, with an average review report showing around 95 per cent of students progressing from one level to the next and about 78 per cent gaining their intended qualification within the expected time. Progression rates for the students taking Higher National qualifications have been satisfactory with an average report showing a completion rate of around 68 per cent. In reports which show high progression rates, these are often linked to clear admissions and student support policies, and careful monitoring of student progress. This is typically by a system of identifying students at risk of leaving their programmes prematurely or of failing. When such a student is identified, staff offer advice and guidance. When students withdraw, there is, in most cases, careful recording of the reasons. Reports confirm that these are mostly for personal, financial or job-related reasons. In one instance, lower progression rates are attributed to the introduction of more rigorous assessment procedures. There is evidence of frequent progression from HNC to HND or from HND to honours degree programmes [Chesterfield College: Computing SR02/2005; City of Bath College: Building and Surveying SR05/2005].

52 The academic tutorial system is a major strength and is reported as a significant factor in creating a supportive and empowering learning environment. Reports frequently emphasise that students are appreciative of staff, who they describe as accessible and friendly. Staff have an open-door policy which is supplemented by

telephone and email contact and part-time students especially appreciate the opportunity for telephone and email support. This informality is structured within a formal system of carefully documented review tutorials, typically once a term or semester, when each student receives an individual report on his/her progress and has the opportunity to discuss his/her plans with a tutor. This is often in the form of a personal development plan or framework which both students and staff value: 'Students value the confidence and discipline that the Framework encourages. It helps them to realise the importance of workload management and career planning, and generally enhances their performance as independent learners equipped to enter the world of work, or to undertake further study' [Suffolk College, Ipswich: Biosciences, SR41/2005].

53 In many colleges, group tutorials take place throughout the year and may be supplemented by additional tutorials based upon student need. A typical example of good practice is an additional mathematics class that has been introduced to help those students who need this support. The close working relationship of staff and students in the colleges reviewed ensures that student progression problems are identified and addressed. The following quotation summarises the situation in most of the colleges reviewed: 'Tutorial support on all programmes is readily available and helpfully delivered, often on a one-to-one basis, with clear explanations and precise guidance. Students commented on the enthusiasm of staff and their willingness to operate an open-door policy' [Accrington and Rossendale College: Music, SR23/2005]. Reviewers' critical comments centre on low levels of staffing available for student support and a lack of clarity in students' minds about the support system. Occasionally, reviewers have been concerned that the high level of student support might compromise students' progress towards independent learning: 'The reviewers consider it possible that in a few cases, the high level of support provided may make it difficult for those students to adjust to the independent learning required at higher levels; for example, if they progress to the final year of an honours degree' [Warwickshire College: Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences, SR37/2005].

54 The subject-based tutorial system is typically backed up by a college-wide network of pastoral care, although even here the academic tutor will often be the first port of call. Reports are positive about this network. For example: 'There is a comprehensive range of college-wide student support services geared to the needs of adult returners. This includes literacy support, financial advice, careers guidance, and childcare support and specialist services for students with disabilities [Boston College: Social Policy and Administration and Social Work, SR06/2006]. While students are satisfied with the careers guidance they receive, this tends to come from their subject staff, supplemented by input from visiting lecturers and practitioners: 'Students confirmed that the advice available from the central Careers Service is easily accessible, but is of very limited value to higher education students, who tend to seek advice from their specialist lecturers' [Basingstoke College of Technology: Art and Design, SR03/2005].

### Summary of features of good practice: Student progression

- a carefully planned admissions process, involving such elements as staff visits to schools, taster sessions and user-friendly documentation (paragraph 49)
- well-organised induction that is focused on the needs of the student intake and that clarifies the distinctive nature of higher education (paragraph 50)
- the careful monitoring of student progress, typically by means of a system of identifying students at risk, and the recording of the reasons for student withdrawal (paragraph 51)
- an open-door policy by academic tutors, supplemented by telephone and email links that are especially appreciated by part-time students (paragraph 52)
- the academic tutorial system which is a significant factor in creating a supportive but empowering learning environment (paragraph 52)
- additional tutorials which are geared to student need (paragraph 53).

### Learning resources

55 The high quality of teaching staff is identified as a central strength of Learning resources in most reports. In the best cases, staff are well qualified with appropriate academic (including teaching) qualifications and subject based professional experience. A core of full-time tutors is supported by part-time staff and visiting lecturers who contribute their up-to-date knowledge of the interaction of the academic subject with the world of work. 'The dedicated and highly qualified teaching team is a particular strength of the provision. Their level of expertise is appropriate and effective for the delivery of the curricula and is informed by their professional practice. They bring a wealth of industrial experience to the learning environment' [Warwickshire College, Royal Leamington Spa, Rugby and Moreton Morrell: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR10/2005]. In a few cases there are not enough staff to satisfy the needs of students and in these cases the small number of staff leave the subject team vulnerable to factors such as illness, or a mismatch between the expertise of the staff and the subjects they are required to teach and assess.

56 In the best cases the college recognises the demands of higher education teaching in the weighting of staff teaching contact hours, so that time is provided for staff to keep abreast of current developments in their field. For example, '...staff are well supported to update their teaching skills and maintain subject currency' [North East Surrey College of Technology: Subjects Allied to Medicine, SR31/2005]. College support for staff development in teaching and learning may include setting up separate funds for higher education, but support tends to be mainly training in skills rather than the promotion of subject knowledge, expertise and scholarship. One college, in cooperation with its partner university, has developed a 'Higher Level Thinking Skills' guide as part of its staff development programme [Derby College: Engineering, SR15/2006]. In other colleges, staff development may be linked with gaining a teaching qualification, and supported by a sufficient and well-monitored time allowance for this purpose: 'There is a clear policy of a minimum of 10 self-directed study days a year for staff development...'. Support is given to new staff

to gain a teaching qualification and for staff studying for a higher degree... . There is considerable evidence of their updating in their specialist skills' [Suffolk College, Ipswich: Biosciences, SR41/2005]. When considering these examples of good practice, colleges will need to be mindful of legislation introduced in 2007 which indicates that every full-time teacher must complete at least 30 hours of continuing professional development each year (The Further Education Teachers, Continuing Professional Development and Registration (England) Regulations 2007, Statutory Instrument 2007 No. 2116).

57 In most cases colleges provide a highly supportive learning environment for higher education students. This is a considerable achievement for staff, particularly for those who have substantial teaching commitments to further education programmes and who usually teach for more hours each week than their counterparts in higher education institutions. The opportunities for staff to continue to engage in scholarship can be limited, in part because of the time they devote to teaching. In a few cases, reports refer to staff development programmes that, while strong in pedagogy, do not foster subject or professional development. In addition, take-up is sometimes limited because of pressure of work.

58 A small number of reports refer to arrangements to mentor new members of staff. In all such cases the reference is favourable: 'A mentoring system is in place for new staff that includes observation of teaching and support throughout the academic year. The Teaching and Learning Strategy includes plans to introduce a competency-based induction tailored to meet the individual needs of new staff' [Accrington and Rossendale College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR01/2006].

59 Many reports identify learning resource centres as a key strength. The best ones offer a welcoming learning environment, including ample quiet spaces for study, and friendly and supportive staff who introduce new students to the resources effectively by means of face-to-face induction and user-friendly documentation. Learning resource centre staff liaise closely with subject staff about the monitoring and updating of stock and may sit on subject committees. Stock is well managed through systems involving, for example, keeping key texts on a reference only or short-term loan basis. The systems take into account the special problems faced by part-time students, as do the extended opening hours and remote access systems for making or extending loans: 'The College has a spacious, well-equipped learning resource centre which is supported by helpful and knowledgeable staff. Students receive a full induction to the facilities... . The opening times enable reasonable access for both full and part-time students... . A helpful range of leaflets guide students to the programme specific resources and their location' [Bradford College: Building and Surveying, SR27/2005].

60 While a large number of learning resource centres have most of the characteristics listed above, there are some serious concerns in a few colleges. These include restricted opening hours, a noisy environment coupled with a lack of quiet study places, insufficient book or journal stock, with many texts being dated, and the inadequate management of the stock. These concerns have led to reviewers making a number of 'approved' judgements for learning resources, referred to in paragraph 11 above.

61 Many colleges have very good information and communication technology provision. Up-to-date hardware and software, both centrally and at subject level, is readily accessible in drop-in centres and rooms dedicated to higher education students and is provided with adequate technical support: 'The computers are networked and are running up-to-date software. Additional access in the evening is provided at assessment time and managed flexibly by negotiation between academic and technical staff and students. Students report that this system works effectively and that they are able to gain easy access to these resources' [Accrington and Rossendale College: Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR01/2006].

62 Full account is taken of the precise needs of students. In one case, for example, community outreach students are given access to portable computers on a short-term loan basis [Chesterfield College: Computing, SR02/2005]. In colleges where computing facilities are limited and dated, students do not use them well and prefer to use their own computers at home or at work. Elsewhere, access to specialist software may be restricted, because the computer laboratories are used by students on other programmes. Some computer suites lack air-conditioning resulting in unacceptable temperatures and poor air quality. In the previous report *Learning from higher education in further education colleges in England 2003-05*, the use of virtual learning environments was described as being in its infancy. The 2005-07 reports indicate that this situation has not changed significantly. This limits opportunities for part-time students, in particular, to access learning materials and assignment details off-site.

63 Reports identify specialist equipment and accommodation as a key strength which makes a major contribution to the learning environment. In such cases, it is variously characterised as being industry-standard, first rate, admirable, equipped to professional standards and readily accessible. Sometimes reviewers note that this represents a considerable financial investment by the college. In two cases, specialist equipment was insufficient in some respects or not fully accessible because of poor booking arrangements. In colleges which have been designated as Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE), the resources, primarily for further education students, often provide additional learning resources of high quality for higher education students.

### Summary of features of good practice: Learning resources

- the recognition and allowance for the demands of higher education teaching in the weighting of staff teaching contact hours (paragraph 56)
- the mentoring systems for new members of staff that are used in a few colleges (paragraph 58)
- the close liaison of learning resource centres and subject staff, well-managed stock and other arrangements, such as extended opening hours and remote access loan systems that support part-time students (paragraph 59)
- the flexible and imaginative management of information and communication technology to ensure optimal use by students (paragraph 61).



## Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

64 Most colleges have well established and effective quality assurance processes that contribute to the integrity of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. In the best examples these reflect the Academic Infrastructure and have a strong focus on higher education [Cleveland College of Art and Design: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR18/2005; Derby College: Engineering, SR15/2006]. They include annual monitoring reports that analyse and evaluate a wide range of information, such as student statistical data, feedback from students, external examiner reports and relevant committee minutes and make provision for periodic in-depth reviews, including those linked with re-validation every five years. Such quality assurance processes result in clear action plans, provide for the scrutiny of key documents by senior staff outside the subject in question and ensure that all quality assurance processes are completed. In the most effective examples these processes are disseminated through the use of clear and accurate quality assurance manuals written by a member of staff who has dedicated oversight of all higher education provision, including responsibility for supporting quality assurance in higher education [East Riding College: Computing, SR13/2006; Gateshead College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR16/2005].

65 Colleges have increasingly been adopting quality assurance processes that are suited to higher education [Hull College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR02/2006; Mid-Cheshire College of Further Education: Art and Design, SR38/2005]. However, a number rely on a model designed for further education provision which addresses the requirements of the Learning and Skills Council and Ofsted. This means that there is a lack of evidence specific to higher education which could be used to enhance higher education programmes. For example, student questionnaires lack a higher education focus, or the data collected do not discriminate between further and higher education students sufficiently. In a number of cases colleges need to do more to ensure that quality systems for higher education programmes are clearly documented and applied to all programmes, whether validated by a higher education institution or by Edexcel. Colleges also need to ensure that all programme managers are aware of the quality assurance policies and procedures, and of their responsibilities to implement them.

66 The review reports confirm that close cooperation with a higher education institution can help colleges with the design and implementation of quality assurance processes. For example, 'The incorporation of the University's documentation and practices into course review processes has stimulated the College to re-examine its procedures and to review its standards' [Gateshead College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR16/2005]. The higher education institution may support the relationship by means of a link tutor who makes regular visits and sits on key college committees, with the college having representation on equivalent higher education institution committees. The involvement of senior staff can also be very beneficial: 'The University's Dean and Quality Manager, Pro Vice-Chancellor, and Vice Chancellor have the opportunity to read all external examiner reports and may make recommendations to College course directors concerning issues, with the expectation of feedback on action taken. This loop is vital to successful operation of the quality assurance process' [North Warwickshire and Hinckley College: Art and Design,

SR32/2005]. However, sometimes feedback from external degree awarding bodies or external examiners is variable in nature and does not always provide a focus for enhancing students' education.

67 Colleges which offer a small number of HNC/D programmes are conforming to the quality assurance processes required by Edexcel, and in some cases, making efforts to provide additional assurance: 'At present, there is no Examination Board in place for the HNC Fine Art, but this is being introduced in the current academic year to confirm student assessment and formalise the examination process beyond the minimum requirements of Edexcel' [Kensington and Chelsea College: Art and Design SR10/2006].

68 Colleges normally respond rapidly and positively to the reports of external examiners and external verifiers. Typically, there is central coordination of the responses to these reports to ensure that they are considered at programme level, that an action plan is completed, approved and carefully documented and that the external examiner is informed. However, in a small number of cases major issues raised by the external examiner had not been addressed. While the reports of the external examiners are typically described as being thorough and helpful, it is not always clear to whom they are referring when they are reporting on more than one group of students.

69 In the best cases, the collection and analysis of student statistical data are thorough, comprehensive and presented in a form that readily informs academic decision-making [Stamford College: Art and Design, SR36/2005; City College Manchester: Art and Design, SR04/2005]. In some cases, however, statistical data are entirely lacking or are not analysed effectively so that, for example, it is not possible for college staff to monitor variations in the performance of students in different modules or different programmes, or across different years. This means that the college cannot demonstrate consistency in the achievement of academic standards.

70 Most reports identify the responsiveness of colleges to student views as a significant strength. For example: 'The College elicits student views in a number of ways, including questionnaires, focus groups, informal feedback, the student council and the presence of students on college committees. Students testify that their concerns are acted on' [Accrington and Rossendale College: Music, SR23/2005]. Colleges frequently rely on informal contacts to supplement meetings and questionnaires. Most reports judged that this worked well: 'Students report satisfaction with their representation on...committees, but prefer to use informal processes that provide a rapid response to their concerns' [Cleveland College of Art and Design: Art and Design/Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies, SR18/2005], and 'The views of students are also considered through their membership of programme team meetings. Part-time students sometimes find it difficult to attend meetings. However, students are satisfied that staff respond to their concerns, usually expressed through informal contacts, in an effective manner' [Newbury College: Engineering, SR05/2006].



71 In some colleges, students expressed concern at the use of a college-wide further education questionnaire that did not give them the opportunity to express views about specific modules and at the lack of any feedback about action arising from such questionnaires. Occasionally there was poor communication with students '...there are arrangements for student representatives to be elected...who would meet staff to address day-to-day course management issues. The current students were not aware of this and had not elected representatives' [City of Bristol College: Building and Surveying, SR19/2005].

72 The best self-evaluations produced by the colleges were accurate, self-critical and evaluative, identifying strengths and weaknesses and outlining the action proposed to rectify the latter [Northbrook College, Sussex: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts/Music, SR01/2005; Wakefield College: Dance, Drama and Performance Arts, SR09/2005]. However, in many cases the self-evaluation was largely descriptive and lacked a self-critical approach. Reviewers reported that the preparation of the self-evaluation had usually been a careful and exhaustive process, involving college and subject staff, students and employers. One example of good practice was an appendix to the self-evaluation, in the form of a student self-evaluation of their education, prepared on a collaborative basis by college student representatives and a Students' Union officer from the validating university.

73 In all five re-reviews the reports are unanimous in praising the positive way in which these colleges have responded to areas for improvement identified in the first review report. For example, 'The positive response to the previous visit...indicates that there is effective engagement with the quality assurance process, combined with a readiness to analyse problems and put in place procedures and systems that are effective in dealing with issues' [Dewsbury College: Art and Design, SR16/2006].

#### **Summary of features of good practice: maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality**

- the supplement of annual monitoring reports by intensive in-depth reviews every five years (paragraph 64)
- the scrutiny of key documents by senior staff outside the subject in question (paragraph 64)
- a higher education forum that fosters the exchange of good practice, discussion of common areas for further development and the generation of a higher education ethos (paragraph 66)
- the close relationship between link tutors from higher education institutions and college subject staff as well as the participation of senior higher education institution staff in the quality process (paragraph 66)
- a central point with responsibility for ensuring that all matters in connection with external examiners' reports are considered (paragraph 68)
- effective communication with students, through student councils, committees and focus groups (paragraph 70).

## Conclusions

74 Higher education in the colleges reviewed has many strengths. The most successful may be characterised by the following strengths identified in this report:

### Aims

- colleges' aims which take account of their mission, vision or strategy statements (paragraph 14)
- the inclusion of aims to develop students' non subject-specific skills (paragraph 17).

### Intended learning outcomes

- intended learning outcomes which are clearly defined and take appropriate account of the Academic Infrastructure, relate well to the overall aims of the programmes, are clearly stated and are appropriate to the level of the award (paragraph 18)
- well-written programme specifications for each programme of study (paragraph 18).

### Curricula

- curricula which are informed by current professional and occupational needs and practices and are technically and vocationally challenging (paragraph 22)
- curricula which are enriched through formal and informal liaison with employers and staff engagement in skills and subject updating activities (paragraph 22).

### Assessment

- a formal engagement with the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students* to develop and enhance assessment strategies, provide programmes with clear frameworks for managing assessment processes and include procedures for external examining and assessment boards (paragraphs 26; 27)
- assessment methods which are sufficiently varied, contextualised, challenging and clearly designed to measure the students' achievement of learning outcomes (paragraph 29)
- assessment criteria, set at the appropriate levels, which link to learning outcomes and are made clear to, and are understood by, students (paragraph 31)
- internal verification and moderation processes which are rigorous; including fair and consistent marking at the appropriate level and written feedback which is detailed and supportive of student learning especially when standardised feedback forms are used (paragraphs 32; 33)
- the assessments for work-related projects which encourage students to relate theory and practice and engage in live projects and realistic exercises (paragraph 34)

- the close working relationships between colleges and employers which help to ensure that there are well-designed work-related assignments and rigorous processes in place to assess the work-related elements of students' learning (paragraph 34).

### Student achievement

- students' achievement of the intended learning outcomes set for their programmes in line with the level of awards and in accordance with the FHEQ (paragraph 35)
- students' achievements which represent added-value for the many students who enter their programmes with modest qualifications (paragraph 37)
- the achievements of Foundation Degree students, particularly in Music and Performance Arts programmes (paragraph 38)
- the students' successful acquisition of the knowledge and skills they need to enable them to gain employment and progress to further study (paragraphs 39 to 41)
- assessed work which demonstrates students' ability to relate theory and practice, to make use of academic and professional sources and to offer evaluative and critical appraisals (paragraph 42).

### Teaching and learning

- a wide range of approaches to teaching and learning underpinned by staff subject expertise and their industrial or professional experience which is used to great effect (paragraph 47)
- systems to enable colleges to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning provided to higher education students (paragraph 48).

### Student progression

- the admission and induction processes which are user-friendly, effective and focused on the needs of the student intake (paragraphs 49; 50)
- students' good progression rates which are supported by clear admissions and student support policies and careful monitoring of student progress (paragraph 51)
- friendly and accessible staff who work within a tutorial system and help create a supportive but empowering learning environment (paragraph 52)
- comprehensive college-wide networks of pastoral care which supplement the subject tutorial system (paragraph 54).

### Learning resources

- well-qualified full-time staff, supported by part-time and visiting lecturers who ensure that teaching is directly connected to the world of work (paragraph 55)
- staff development programmes, linked to a clear time allowance, which support the development both of subject and of broader pedagogical skills (paragraph 56)
- learning resource centres which offer a welcoming and supportive learning environment (paragraph 59)
- information and communication technology hardware and software that is up-to-date, readily accessible and has adequate technical support (paragraph 61)
- industry-standard specialist equipment which makes a major contribution to the learning environment (paragraph 63).

### Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

- well established and effective quality processes which underpin the integrity of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities (paragraph 64)
- quality assurance processes that are suited to higher education (paragraph 65)
- close cooperation with a higher education institution which helps colleges with the design and implementation of quality assurance processes (paragraph 66)
- rapid and positive response to the reports of external examiners (paragraph 68)
- the collection and analysis of student statistical data which are thorough, comprehensive and presented in a form that readily informs academic decision-making (paragraph 69)
- responsiveness to student views (paragraph 70).

### Recommendations for further development

75 As well as the considerable good practice and many strengths in the management and delivery of higher education programmes in the 51 colleges reviewed, the reviewers identified a number of areas where there is scope for further development and enhancement.

These include the need to:

#### Intended learning outcomes

- ensure that information on intended learning outcomes is presented consistently within unit, module and programme documents (paragraph 21)
- articulate clearly the purpose of intended learning outcomes and the difference between intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria in unit, module and programme documents (paragraph 21).

## Curricula

- ensure that appropriate levels of staff scholarship and research are undertaken and used to inform the development of the curricula (paragraph 22).

## Assessment

- continue to develop assessment strategies for HNC and HND programmes, including greater engagement with the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* is desirable (paragraph 26)
- reduce an over-reliance on coursework which could disadvantage students progressing to other higher education programmes which use examinations and ensure that students are not disadvantaged by an incremental approach to assessment design and by a lack of distinctive criteria for Distinction, Merit and Pass grades (paragraphs 30; 31)
- establish and implement more formal recording systems for the internal verification process to ensure the integrity of student assessment (paragraph 32)
- make greater use of standardised feedback forms to ensure consistency of written feedback on student assignments (paragraph 33).

## Student achievement

- improve the development of students' abilities in critical analysis, problem solving and theoretical skills, so that they can access a wider range of academic materials and primary research and improve referencing of their work (paragraph 42)
- continue to address the low completion rates for some programmes (paragraph 43).

## Teaching and learning

- ensure that students who are registered on different awards at different levels, and who are taught in the same group, experience teaching and learning which is appropriately demanding for each student (paragraph 46)
- increase the development and use of virtual learning environments and other interactive learning to increase students' access to programme information and to teaching, learning and assessment material (paragraphs 46 and 62).

## Student progression

- improve the quality and consistency of handbooks by ensuring, for example, that good practice is shared across programmes or departments (paragraph 50)
- monitor the high level of academic support to ensure that progress towards independent learning is not compromised (paragraph 53).

### Learning resources

- increase the opportunities for the development of staff scholarship and the promotion of subject-specific staff development (paragraph 57)
- ensure that specialist equipment is adequate and readily accessible (paragraph 63).

### Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

- further develop quality assurance processes to accommodate the needs of higher education provision, and clearly communicate and fully implement these processes (paragraph 65)
- ensure that all concerns raised by external examiners are documented, carefully considered and, where appropriate, acted upon (paragraph 68)
- improve the collection and analysis of student statistical data to inform academic decision-making (paragraph 69)
- improve communication with students, and ensure that students receive feedback on how their views have informed decisions affecting their education (paragraph 71).

## **Annex 1: Academic reviews in further education colleges in 2005-07**

### **Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences**

Huddersfield Technical College  
 Pershore Group of Colleges  
 Warwickshire College  
 Walford and North Shropshire College

### **Art and Design**

Basingstoke College of Technology  
 Bradford College  
 City College Manchester  
 City of Sunderland College  
 Cleveland College of Art and Design  
 Dewsbury College  
 Filton College\*  
 Kensington and Chelsea College  
 Leeds College of Art and Design  
 Macclesfield College  
 Mid-Cheshire College  
 North Warwickshire and Hinckley College\*  
 Oxford and Cherwell College\*  
 Southwark College  
 Stamford College  
 Warwickshire College, Royal Leamington Spa, Rugby and Moreton Morrell\*  
 West Thames College\*

### **Biosciences**

City of Westminster College  
 North East Surrey College of Technology  
 Suffolk College, Ipswich

### **Building and Surveying**

Bradford College  
 City College Birmingham  
 City of Bath College  
 City of Bristol College  
 Lambeth College  
 New College Nottingham  
 Stockport College of Further and Higher Education

### **Business and Management**

City of Wolverhampton College

### Communications, Media, Film and Television Studies

Accrington and Rossendale College  
Cleveland College of Art and Design\*  
North Warwickshire and Hinckley College\*  
Oxford and Cherwell College\*  
Stratford-upon-Avon College  
Warwickshire College, Royal Leamington Spa, Rugby and Moreton Morrell\*

### Computing

Chesterfield College  
East Riding College

### Dance, Drama and Performance Arts

Blackpool and The Fylde College  
Doncaster College\*  
Filton College\*  
Gateshead College\*  
Hull College  
Newcastle College\*  
Northbrook College Sussex\*  
Wakefield College  
West Thames College\*

### Engineering

Derby College  
Newbury College

### Music

Accrington and Rossendale College  
Doncaster College\*  
Gateshead College\*  
Newcastle College\*  
New College Telford  
Northbrook College, Sussex\*

### Social Policy and Administration and Social work

Boston College  
Bromley College of Further and Higher Education

### Subjects Allied to Medicine

North East Surrey College of Technology



## **Annex 2: Reviewers who took part in Academic reviews of subjects of higher education in further education colleges in 2005-07**

Amodio, Dr Christopher  
 Applebee, Mr Tim  
 Arney, Dr David  
 Arnison, Professor Chris  
 Backhouse, Mr Duncan  
 Baker, Ms Marie  
 Banister, Dr Peter  
 Barkham, Dr John  
 Bates, Mr Andrew  
 Beckwith, Dr C Paul  
 Behagg, Professor Clive  
 Bennett, Dr John  
 Bennett, Mr Joe  
 Birch, Mrs Miriam  
 Birrell, Professor W Derek  
 Blackie, Ms Penny  
 Blauciak, Ms Mary  
 Blinko, Mr Timothy  
 Brooks, Dr Darrell  
 Brown, Mr Jason  
 Browning, Eur Ing Geoffrey  
 Buckland, Mr Maldwyn  
 Bull, Professor John  
 Burgess, Professor Rodney  
 Burnside, Mr Kevin  
 Burrows, Mr David  
 Bush, Mr Roger  
 Butel, Mr Jeffrey  
 Caddis, Mr Michael  
 Cantwell, Mr Tom  
 Caul, Dr Leslie  
 Chapman, Mr Keith  
 Clancy, Mr Tony  
 Clark, Mr Peter  
 Clarke, Dr Andrea  
 Clarke, Mr Peter  
 Collins, Dr David  
 Compton, Ms Jo  
 Conlon, Mr Roger  
 Cooper, Dr Mark  
 Cotgrave, Mrs Alison  
 Curtis, Mr Alan  
 Davenport, Dr Dee

Downes, Mrs C Elisabeth  
 Dunbar, Mr Tim  
 Dunsby, Professor Jonathan  
 Edwards, Dr Gordon  
 Fligg, Dr David  
 Fryer, Dr Colin  
 Gaimster, Mrs Julia  
 Gartland, Professor Kevan  
 Gaskins, Dr Bill  
 Gilbert, Ms Myra  
 Gilby, Mr Tony  
 Glass, Professor Robert  
 Hackett, Mr Ted  
 Hall, Mr Nigel  
 Hargreaves, Mr Gary  
 Hawthorn, Mr John  
 Hegarty, Mr Keith  
 Hind, Dr Abigail  
 Hodgkinson, Mr Robert  
 Holloway, Mr John  
 Honeyman, Mr Rob  
 Horsburgh, Mr A Grant  
 Hughes, Mr Sion  
 Hunter, Mr Jim  
 Hurley, Dr John  
 Ives, Mr Simon  
 James, Ms Stephanie  
 Johnson, Professor Keith  
 Jones, Mr H Robert  
 Jones, Ms Barbara  
 Jones-Devitt, Mrs Stella  
 Kiernan, Eur Ing Mary  
 Lange, Mrs Janet  
 Lawrence, Mrs Joan  
 Liggins, Dr Andrea  
 Lister, Ms Rosi  
 Lyne, Dr Mark  
 Malem, Ms Wendy  
 Markey, Mr Philip  
 Marsden, Mr Ken  
 Mason, Mr Rob  
 McHugh, Ms Marilyn  
 Mcleod, Dr Julie

Middleton, Mr Paul  
Monroe, Mr W R Paul  
Morgan, Dr John F  
Naylor, Mr Gary  
Newton, Miss Rita  
Nottingham, Mrs Annet  
Owen, Mr W Richard  
Owen, Mrs Monica  
Paddon, Dr Derek  
Park, Dr Julian  
Parkinson, Mr Millard  
Plumbridge, Mrs Christine  
Purdey, Ms Heather  
Purkis, Ms Charlotte  
Read, Dr Ann  
Riley, Mrs Rhona L  
Saffhill, Mr Steve  
Scanlan, Mr Liam  
Scott, Dr Ian  
Seath, Mr Martin  
Shaw, Professor Marion  
Skinner, Ms Polly  
Snell, Mr Richard  
Springer, Dr Paul  
Stanfield, Dr Colin  
Starr, Professor Beryl  
Stevens, Dr Graham N  
Stevens, Ms Jane  
Strong, Dr R Jeremy  
Taylor, Mr Kevin  
Theaker, Ms Alison  
Tinker, Dr John  
Twemlow, Dr Graham  
Upton, Dr Andrew  
Warr, Mrs Elizabeth  
Welch, Mr Ian  
Wheeler, Dr Richard  
Wheeler, Ms Marcia  
Wheller, Mr Denis  
Wilcox, Dr Amanda  
Williams, Mrs Pauline  
Wright, Dr Steven  
Wright, Ms Linda

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